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Ten Minutes and Fifty (Two) Years Ago: the three TV versions of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*

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Abstract

This article complements existing discussions of the three versions of Rodgers and Hammerstein's TV musical Cinderella *by highlighting three specific aspects: (1) the time period and location of the narrative in the context of other musicals by Rodgers and Hammerstein (and by Rodgers and Hart), (2) the song 'Ten Minutes Ago' and its musical, visual, and dramatic elements as presented in each version, and (3) the cultural politics of the different versions, from the colour-blind casting of the Disney version to more subtle narrative moments in the original 1957 version, and how they reflect very different periods in American life.*

Keywords

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At 8pm on 31 March 1957, 107 million Americans gathered in front of their relatively new TV sets to watch a live CBS broadcast of *Cinderella* – a musical conceived especially for television by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. With over half the nation's viewing population watching – the largest TV audience up to that date – *Cinderella* received unprecedented distribution for a new musical. In order to reach the equivalent number of theatregoers, a conventional Broadway show would require a run of over a hundred years (Block 2003: 172; see also Fink 2004: 1). Yet almost as soon as it had been seen, this version of *Cinderella* was essentially lost to the viewing public for almost fifty years. Remade twice, in 1965 and 1997, it is these later TV versions of *Cinderella* that are likely to be much more familiar to subsequent generations.[1]

Geoffrey Block (Block 2003: 171–201) and Ethan Mordden (Mordden 1992: 184–185) have noted many of the differences in the plot, script, and musical numbers between the three TV versions. This article complements these discussions by focusing on three specific elements: (1) contextualizing the plot of *Cinderella* within Rodgers' work as a whole, (2) examining the song 'Ten Minutes Ago' and its musical, visual, and dramatic presentation in each of the three versions, and (3) highlighting cultural politics, from the colour-blind casting of the Disney version to more subtle narrative moments in the original 1957 version.

TV and Broadway: The Rodgers and Hammerstein connection

As a new broadcast media, television was hungry for Broadway musicals: *Annie Get Your Gun, Anything Goes*, and *Peter Pan* were all broadcast

1. There is also a London pantomime version from 1958 and a stage adaptation available from the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization mostly seen in community, high school, and college theatres – although some high profile productions in recent years have included those staged by New York City Opera (1993, and 2004) and at the Kennedy Center (2001).

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as TV versions in the 1950s. Also prominent in early TV programming were works by Richard Rodgers: these included adaptations of two of his shows with Lorenz Hart, *A Connecticut Yankee* and *Dearest Enemy*; the documentary series *Victory at Sea* which used Rodgers' music adapted and orchestrated by the ever imaginative Robert Russell Bennett; two *Ed Sullivan Show* specials; and *The General Foods Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Show* – a star-studded homage to Rodgers and Hammerstein (Block 2003: 173–174).

Meanwhile, on Broadway, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's *My Fair Lady* began its record-breaking run in March 1956, and Julie Andrews fast became a hot stage property. Ironically, Rodgers and Hammerstein had themselves considered a musical version of *Pygmalion* but had abandoned the idea as 'unworkable' (Block 2003: 172n). Their two most recent shows, *Me and Juliet* and *Pipe Dream*, had not fared terribly well – at least compared to almost every other show they had written together. So when the opportunity to combine Julie Andrews, a new musical, *and* television arose, it proved too irresistible for the team to refuse.

Cinderella – an unusual choice

A straight up European fairy tale was, however, not typical subject matter for Rodgers and Hammerstein – Rodgers especially. Prior to his partnership with Hammerstein, which began with *Oklahoma!* in 1943, Rodgers worked on around thirty stage shows and half a dozen movies with Lorenz Hart. Three quarters of those plots are set in a contemporary time period, and almost two thirds are located in the United States, often both (Wood 2000: 166–176). Hammerstein's career prior to *Oklahoma!* included producing as well as lyric and book writing. Considering only those shows to which he contributed the book, over two thirds use contemporary settings and over half have American locations. Finally, of Rodgers and Hammerstein's eleven shows together, from *Oklahoma!* to *The Sound of Music*, most are set either in more-or-less contemporary time periods or in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, while three quarters are located somewhere in the United States (see figure 1).

Date	Title	Time Period	Location
1943	*Oklahoma!*	early twentieth century	US (Midwest)
1945	*Carousel*	nineteenth century	US (East Coast: New England)
1945	*State Fair* (movie)	contemporary	US (Midwest: Iowa)
1947	*Allegro*	early twentieth century	US
1949	*South Pacific*	(almost) contemporary	US-occupied South Pacific Islands
1951	*The King and I*	nineteenth century	South-East Asia
1953	*Me and Juliet*	contemporary	US (East Coast)
1955	*Pipe Dream*	contemporary	US (West Coast)
1957	***Cinderella (TV)***	***distant past***	***Fairy Tale Kingdom***
1958	*Flower Drum Song*	contemporary	US (West Coast: San Francisco)
1959	*The Sound of Music*	almost contemporary	Europe (Austria)

Figure 1: Time periods and geographical locations of Rodgers and Hammerstein shows from 1943 to 1959.

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While is it true that there is an exotic quality to some of the locations, modern Anglo-American culture always has a strong presence: a 'progressive' English governess in *The King and I*, the US military in *South Pacific*. A fairy tale kingdom in the distant past seems an anomaly for Rodgers and Hammerstein whose shows, on the whole, tend to be grounded and realistic. They usually deal with difficult issues without easy solutions – often requiring some kind of sacrifice, even someone's death. This was not quite standard fare for a 1950s TV fairy-tale musical, although it did prove to be a winning combination thirty years later for Hammerstein's protégé Stephen Sondheim in *Into the Woods*. Still, Rodgers and Hammerstein do imbue their fairy tale characters in *Cinderella* with a credible, earthbound humanity and, occasionally, contemporary wisdom and humour.

The three versions of *Cinderella*

The original 1957 version of *Cinderella* was broadcast live and in full colour, but it was recorded in a black and white format called Kinescope, which was not considered high enough quality for re-broadcast. Kinescope was indeed soon replaced by the superior quality VHS format. So unfortunately this first version was never again seen on TV. In fact, until 2004 when the original Kinescope version was released on DVD, the only way to see it at all was to visit the Rodgers and Hammerstein Theater Library in New York for a special screening.

In 1965, after the death of Oscar Hammerstein, Rodgers saw an opportunity for a second chance to bring *Cinderella* to the small screen – this time reconceived for a new generation and with the possibility of multiple re-broadcasts from videotape. This new version not only had a different cast, but also a new script by Joseph Schrank and additional Rodgers songs. The new production was broadcast nine times between 1965 and 1974.

In 1997, 40 years after the original version, and on the impetus of Whitney Houston, a new Disney-sponsored TV production of *Cinderella* emerged for a generation brought up on *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) et al. This version had three more Rodgers songs, even more lavish production values, another new script by Robert L. Freedman and, perhaps most significantly, an ethnically diverse cast.

'Ten Minutes Ago'

Occurring at a crucial moment in the narrative, the song 'Ten Minutes Ago' effectively fuses the relationship between the Prince and Cinderella before she beats a hasty retreat into the night. The dramatic set up for the song is the same in each of the three versions: Cinderella arrives at the ball and catches the Prince's eye. She descends a long staircase and he immediately starts to dance with her. There is a brief conversation. They sing: first the Prince, then Cinderella. They express surprise at the depth of their feelings for one another after so brief a time together. The song itself, appropriately enough, is a waltz – indeed, one of Rodgers' finest. And while its structure is unchanged in subsequent versions, the production values, camerawork, orchestral colour, and vocal qualities of the performers are markedly different.

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'Ten Minutes Ago' has no verse, and this gives the opening lines of the chorus a youthful immediacy that nicely fits the moment:

> Ten minutes ago I saw you,
> I looked up when you came through the door
> My head started reeling you gave me the feeling
> The room had no ceiling or floor.
>
> (Rodgers & Hammerstein 2004: 76–79)

One of Rodgers' most commonly used patterns for the choruses of his songs written after 1923 is the AABA format. Typically, this is a 32-bar unit with four 8-bar sections: A8 + A8 + B8 + A8 = 32, with a strong half cadence at the close of the B section. Rodgers frequently uses this pattern for songs where youthful characters make a direct expression of love to one another. If the song also happens to be a waltz, like 'Ten Minutes Ago', each section is typically doubled in length: A16 + A16 + B16 + A16 = 64 with the basic AABA design remaining the same. When Rodgers modifies the design it is usually for expressive purposes (Wood, 2000: chapter 2, 121–155, and chapter 3, 184–197). In 'Ten Minutes Ago', the final A section is extended. At the beginning of the section, the Prince sings:

> In the arms of my love I'm flying
> Over mountain and meadow and glen,
> And I like it so well
> That for all I can tell
> I may never come down again!
> I may never come down to earth again!.
>
> (Rodgers & Hammerstein 2004: 76–79)

And at the words 'I may never come down again' a thwarted cadence adds another eight bars to the section making it 24 (16 + 8) bars – half as long again as the expected length of 16 bars. An expanded lyric matches the longer melodic phrase: 'I may never come down again' is immediately followed by the phrase 'I may never come down *to earth* again'. The musical symbolism is clear: if the lovers are flying high emotionally and unwilling to return to earth, they are also unwilling to return to the home key with a perfect cadence – at least not for another eight bars.

The 1957 version

Julie Andrews and Jon Cypher play the star-crossed lovers in the original broadcast. Compared to the enormous ballrooms of the later productions, the original set seems a little cramped at first. But this is compensated for by some creative camera angles that provide a sense of both intimacy and depth. The ugly sisters look up to the happy couple, who are then seen in the close foreground at the top of the staircase with the camera looking down over the ballroom. The camera then pans with the couple as they descend the stairs to a more private area. We keep our distance at first, providing the couple with a private moment to themselves. As for the singing, Cypher's light operetta tenor is fuller and rounder than the voice of any of the other Princes, while Andrews' unique soprano is

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characteristically crisp and clear. In the spoken dialogue, Cypher's pointed English diction matches that of native speaker Andrews. Yet although it sounds more formal than the later versions, the conversation between the couple is actually the most natural and believable of the three: a little humour about the Prince's many names, a little awkwardness, followed by genuine tenderness and sincerity.

The orchestration of 'Ten Minutes Ago' begins with pizzicato basses and low strings at first, then more violins are added and, later, a little flute and oboe. A magical touch here is the use of the celesta for the A section just before Cinderella takes over the melody. This adds to the fairy-tale quality of the moment.

The 1965 version

Eighteen year old newcomer Lesley Anne Warren plays Cinderella in the 1965 version, with eyes as big as dinner plates and an Audrey Hepburn neck. Stuart Damon is the Prince and gallantly endures this production with an ironic humour that stands out amidst the somewhat wooden performances of everyone else around him (including a lamentably cardboard Ginger Rogers). In this scene Damon also sports what surely must be one of the worst-fitting tunics ever seen on a prince. The relatively static camera movement emphasizes the cavernous space that surrounds the couple, and this is matched by the somewhat stilted and unremarkable dialogue that precedes the song. Virtually all the potential for intimacy in the scene is thus eliminated. Damon's light tenor has a forward, slightly nasal sound and rapid vibrato that produces a vocal timbre not unlike that of musical theatre performer Jack Cassidy. Warren's soprano is bright and forward, also with a nasal edge resulting in a quite distinctive timbre. Supporting the voices is an orchestration of predominantly strings with a touch of harp and a little oboe.

The 1997 Disney version

1990s R 'n' B singer and TV sitcom actress Brandy Norwood plays the title role in the 1997 version, with Paolo Montalban as the Prince. New dialogue precedes the song. Instead of wooden conversation, the Prince tries to find out where he has met Cinderella before with talk of the seasonal pursuits of the idle rich: the lake, the lodge and mountains (presumably for skiing). Cinderella deftly deflects these probes by saying she just likes looking at the mountains, but the overall impression of the conversation is one of acute class-consciousness. When he sings, Montalban's light head voice uses more vocal scoops than prior Princes, but it is complemented by Norwood's more breathy, but equally 1990s timbre – one that might best be described as a Disney-pop hybrid. The camera is at its most mobile in this version, circling the singing and dancing couple slowly at first then more rapidly as the song progresses. The effect matches the line: 'you gave me the feeling the room had no ceiling or floor', and indeed it does make the viewer's head reel somewhat. An extended ensemble dance sequence directly follows the end of the chorus. A fuller orchestral sheen accompanies the singers than previously; a flute doubles the Prince's opening line, while clarinets, flutes, and harp glissandi blend with the strings elsewhere.

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A brief passage for bells occurs at the words 'with the dust of the stars in her eyes'.

Cultural politics

This version is unique in its colour-blind casting, and the resulting presence of high profile non-Caucasian actors and proliferation of multi-racial couples – a minority group infrequently seen on prime time television until relatively recently – certainly represents the American 'kingdom' a little more democratically and imagines a place where anyone might be a king, a queen or indeed a president, regardless of the colour of their skin. Here is visible social commentary and Disney has the cultural status and resources to risk such a move – at least on TV. This would perhaps have pleased Rodgers and Hammerstein, whose stage works do address issues of racism and culture clash and who were known to be supportive of various social causes outside the theatre. Agnes de Mille notes in her autobiography that 'Oscar and Dick take on together not only the regulation charities expected of men in their position, but their own foundation and causes, political issues and social reforms. They work hard at them[...]' (Block 2002: 131). Rodgers also set up a scholarship fund at the Juilliard School to help young black singer Shirley Verrett on her path to the Metropolitan Opera (Secrest 2001: 362–363; Verrett 2003: 76–77).[2] Rodgers' involvement with the committee to re-elect President Roosevelt and his protesting of the House Un-American Activities Committee caused the FBI to open a file on him. Although nothing incriminating was ever found, he was clearly aware of the pressure being placed on his colleagues in the industry by the HUAC and the hearings instigated by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Hammerstein had trouble getting his passport renewed by the State Department and was required to write a letter of justification to prove his loyalty to the United States. He also made the supportive gesture of dining in public with blacklisted screenwriter and playwright Hyman Kraft, who had been forced to appear before HUAC (Fordin 1977: 312–313). Certainly, the decade of the 1950s was a tense time in American culture where anyone might be the subject of a government inquiry and be incarcerated on mere suspicion of involvement with 'unpatriotic' activities. Any critique of the establishment needed to be delicately positioned – much more so than in the relative open culture of 1990s America.

Two moments in the original *Cinderella* may reflect Rodgers and Hammerstein's attitude towards this treatment of their peers in the entertainment industry during the 1940s and 1950s. After Cinderella has fled the ball, the Prince finds her glass slipper and is determined to find its owner. Here is the dialogue between the Prince and the King in the 1957 version:

> Prince: I know it belongs to her.
>
> King: What are you going to do?
>
> Prince: May I have your royal guards to send to the kingdom to search for her, sir?

2. However, see also black singer and star of *No Strings* Diahann Carroll on Rodgers, quoted in Block 2002: 217–224.

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King: Of course you may.

Prince: And your secret service?

King: Well of course my boy. *They never find out anything, but you can try*.

(Rodgers & Hammerstein 1957
[audio transcription: my emphasis])

Whether an oblique reference to Rodgers' FBI file, Hammerstein's run-in with the State Department, or a more generalized dig at the surveillance culture of the time, this quip by the King passes by almost unnoticed yet is delivered by Howard Lindsay with a certain wry humour.

Later, while the search is underway, Cinderella returns to the palace to catch a glimpse of the Prince and is arrested under suspicion of treason. She is about to be taken off to the dungeons but is saved at the last moment by her Fairy Godmother who suggests, as a joke, that the guards try the glass slipper on Cinderella: 'It will give her something to remember while she's in jail' (Rodgers, R. & O. Hammerstein II 1957: audio transcription). Fortunately, it fits. But this is an unusual moment as Cinderella is in real danger – a danger that reflects the palpable precariousness of American cultural life in the 1950s, and one of which the creators of the show were only too aware. These brief but telling narrative moments are entirely absent from the later versions of *Cinderella*. Indeed, the 1965 version is so culturally sterile, that any relevance to contemporary life is crushed by over-cautiousness. Disney, on the other hand, openly celebrates the breaking down of ethnic and class barriers in a kingdom where a Filipino-American Prince can wed a working class African American.

Coda

'Ten Minutes Ago' is a robust enough song to shine through each production in spite of the various changes in performer, tempo and orchestration – as many good musical theatre songs before and since. And seen together, these three TV versions of *Cinderella* take us on a cultural journey from the modest yet utterly beguiling beginnings in the 1950s to the colourful quasi-Mediaeval but ultimately wooden 1960s version, to the energetic pop sound, gingerbread-meets-Gustav Klimt visual style, and ethnically diverse cast of the Disney version. The low picture quality of the 1957 version should not detract from the fact that it seems to embody both the fantasy and the nightmare potential of 1950s American culture, while hoping for a better, more open future that the Disney version is more able to fulfil. It also provides a fascinating insight into a unique moment in the performance history of both TV and musical theatre and gives a tantalizing glimpse at what must have been a truly magical live broadcast.

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